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ABSTRACT

Within teacher education programs, stories of professional practice are increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for developing understanding and critical thinking. This project involved the development of a series of case stories based on the work of early childhood teachers and examined the use of stories by experienced teachers to enable them to find their own voice through writing. Experienced teachers were recruited to participate in a series of three workshops designed to enable teachers to write stories of their teaching experiences. The first workshop was devoted to sharing ideas about stories and writing first drafts. The second workshop focused on story revision. The third workshop was devoted to sharing the final copy of stories and to a participants' celebration. Participating were 15 early childhood teachers. Findings indicated that teachers wrote about staff communications, teacher-parent relationships, challenging children, interesting curricula, and programming decisions. Personal professional writing was used as a vehicle for participating teachers to learn, to review their previous learning, and to consider future decision-making. The small number of participants might be attributed to lack of time in teachers' busy schedules or lack of experience in writing to debrief a distressing or problematic incident. Because reflective story writing of professional practice was found to be satisfying for those who attempt it, it is important to find ways to encourage it in others, such as finding opportunities to share teachers' stories with colleagues and students and promoting reflective writing groups. (Contains 21 references.) (KB)

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# Stories of experience: Professional development for teachers

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Within teacher education programs, stories of professional practice are being increasingly recognised as a powerful approach for developing understanding and critical thinking. Teacher educators, however, tend to limit the use of stories to preservice teacher education and there are few examples of stories being used for the professional development of experienced teachers. This paper will describe a project undertaken by the authors to broaden the use of stories by enabling experienced teachers to find their own voice through their writing. In addition, the paper will examine the implications of the use of stories for the professional development of experienced teachers.

*Margaret is an experienced early childhood teacher who currently works as director of a child care centre. She came to the story writing workshops because she thought she had something to offer preservice student teachers. She didn't realise she had a lot to offer herself ...*

Anyone who has sat down to dinner with a group of teachers will know that teachers often tell stories about their professional experiences. They tell and re-tell stories of particular children, of special incidents, of encounters with other adults. Stories that are celebrations of success and recollections of defeat. Stories that illustrate the puzzling and the contradictory nature of teaching and stories that recount the pleasures and joys of working with children.

Teachers use these stories to make sense of their work (Mattingly, 1991; Noddings & Witherell, 1991). 'As individuals we often make sense of our world by telling and re-telling stories of significant incidents from our personal and professional lives' (Patterson, Fleet and Duffie, 1996 p.v). Ackerman, Maslin-Ostrowski and Christensen (1996 p.21) explain that 'the story form is a sense-making tool for educators'. They go on to describe the value of stories for teachers:

> *... their own stories can help them to better understand and share their theories of practice and dilemmas, and explore new possibilities with one another ... they are challenged and inspired to think more deeply about their practice and to investigate ways to solve problems.*

Stories of professional practice are increasingly recognised as an effective approach for developing understanding and critical thinking (Carter, 1993; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Cole and Knowles, 1995). Stories provide powerful learning experiences, both for

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the writer (Graves, 1990) and the reader (Witherell and Noddings, 1991). The ability of stories to generate discussion, promote reflection and to open windows gives them a unique role in professional development. 'Stories about teaching enable us to organise, articulate, and communicate what we believe about teaching and to reveal, in a narrative style, what we have become as educators' (Jalongo, 1992, p.69).

Teachers' stories contribute to professional growth through the opportunity to reflect on personal practice. As teachers write their own stories or read someone else's story, they think carefully about what they could have, or should have, done in a similar situation. Schubert and Ayers (1992) explain that '... teachers use their experiences as a basis for fashioning responses to similar situations that they encounter daily. They imagine new possibilities and try to anticipate the consequences of acting on them' (p.ix). Writing about their work is one important aspect of the professional development of teachers. The resultant story has a complexity and authenticity which can generate issues for raising professional awareness and developing skills in decision-making. Richert (1992) reports that the teachers she was working with indicated that writing about their experiences 'helped them learn about the issue they described, including its scope, its complexity, and its consequences. By sharing ... with other colleagues in the form of case conferences in which they actually taught one another, their learning was further enhanced' (p.172). Clandinin and Connelly (1991) further emphasise the value of sharing stories. They suggest that stories '... are shared in ways that help readers question their own stories, raise their own questions about practices, and see in the narrative account stories of their own stories' (p 277).

It is important to place this discussion of teachers' stories within the broader context of the current interest in the issue of teacher voice. The work of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), Schubert and Ayers (1992), Witherell and Noddings (1991), Clandinin, Davies, Hogan and Kennard (1993), and other scholars acknowledge the value of teacher voice. For example, Hargreaves (1996, p. 12) cites Butt, Raymond, McCue and Yamagishi (1992, p. 57) to explain the value of teacher voice:

> *the notion of the teacher's voice is important in that it carries the tone, the language, the quality, the feelings, that are conveyed by the way a teacher speaks and writes. In a political sense, the notion of the teacher's voice addresses the right to speak and be represented ...*

There are two levels of voice represented by Butt, Raymond, McCue and Yamagishi. First, the issue of the extent to which the dominant language on teaching allows the authentic voice of teachers to be heard, and second, the issue of discourse and power

which is 'the extent to which the languages of researchers ... form part of a larger network of power that functions for the remote control of teaching practice by policymakers and administrators' (Carter, 1993, p. 8). Hargreaves (1996) agrees that policymakers 'repeatedly ignore or exclude the voices of teachers in the reform process and fail to make reform meaningful for them' (p.12). He goes on to argue that 'recognising and respecting teachers' voices ... gives teachers rightful redress against the background of ... previous and prolonged silence (p. 12-13).'

Hargreaves (1996, pp 13-15), however, warns advocates for teachers' voices that it is important not to let the teacher's voice be represented as '*the* teacher's voice'. That is, not to represent all teachers by one teacher's experiences. In addition, Hargreaves points out that those voices selected for representation are presented at the 'exclusion of other voices'. Third, he argues that teacher voice must be presented contextually because 'the context in which the voices are situated and from which they spring help shape their meaning and weigh their value'.

Although Hargreaves is criticising some existing studies, he also argues that teachers' voices should remain an important research priority. Noddings and Witherell (1991) bring the discussion back to stories when they agree that 'we learn by both hearing and telling stories'. They continue:

> *... Stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changes and with what effect. And of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, listening, learning, and researching to improve the human condition. Telling and listening to stories can be a powerful sign of regard - of caring - for one another.* (p. 280)

Stories of teachers in early childhood are uncommon. There are a few examples from the United States, such as Ayers (1989) and Paley (1990) and (1992). These two examples of writing are quite different; Ayers spent time with six preschool teachers and described their work with children and their ideas and philosophies, whereas Paley writes about her experience with her own children in a thoughtful, insightful way. In the first case, Ayers is writing about the work of other teachers, while Paley is writing about her own teaching experience.

**Learning through stories**

In 1994, the authors of this paper along with a third colleague (Jan Duffie) received a Macquarie University Teaching Development Grant to develop a series of case stories based on the work of early childhood teachers. These case stories were originally planned to be used as resources for preservice teacher education to help student teachers understand the complexity and ambiguity of teaching.

Early childhood teachers who work with children under five years of age often have different working conditions compared with their colleagues working with older children. For example, teachers employed in child care centres work eight hour shifts and have four weeks annual leave. In addition, they work as team members with other staff who have different qualifications and expectations. On graduation, most student teachers gain employment in child care centres and they face different dilemmas to those experienced by teachers in other contexts. Neophyte teachers may find it challenging to work with a variety of staff and coping with the long working hours. It is difficult to prepare student teachers for these conditions, particularly when there is so little published material that describes what it like to be a teacher in an Australian child care centre. One exception is Fleet and Clyde (1993), but there needs to be more sources of information.

**The writing workshops**

With some of the funds provided by the Teaching Development Grant, we proposed to organise a series of workshops to enable early childhood teachers to write stories of their experiences. Once the stories were written, most of the funds were to be used for typing, layout and publication of the stories.

The three successful applicants for the grant acted as workshop leaders. In different ways, we were all familiar with using some kind of story to illustrate aspects of early childhood education. For example, Jan taught management theory through a series of scenarios, Catherine used stories from graduate students to illustrate relevant aspects in lectures and Alma used excerpts from work diaries to demonstrate the professional aspects of working with young children and their families.

We decided to send invitations to teachers who might be interested in participating in the writing workshops. Some names and addresses came from class lists of ex-students and others came from our practicum placement lists. Invitations were posted to over 200 teachers. The invitations explained to teachers that writing stories would help them contribute to their own professional development by encouraging them to reflect on significant events in their teaching. We also explained that the completed stories could

contribute to the professional knowledge of the early childhood teaching field by providing examples of their experiences for student teachers. The letter accompanying the invitation noted: *As a participant in the writing workshops, you will be given time to reflect on a selected incident from your professional life. Opportunities will be provided for you to make sense of what has happened and to consider alternative approaches in similar situations. You will be invited to share your writing in a small group during the workshops and receive valuable responses to help you create a story from your initial ideas. You need not be worried about not being 'a good enough writer'. If you can talk about an event on the telephone or around the dinner table, then you are probably able to write about it. Stories are not essays or examinations to be marked or graded. They are vivid, moving accounts of events that have occurred in you teaching life.*

We planned a series of three workshops because we knew it would take more than one session to develop the stories in sufficient depth and detail and to enable participants to enhance an image of themselves as members of a writing community. The first workshop was held on a Saturday and the day was spent sharing ideas about stories and writing first drafts. A second Saturday workshop was held about a month later and participants re-visited and revised their stories. About ten days later, a final workshop was held on an evening set aside for celebration.

**The first workshop**

*Recollections and reflections: Understanding stories. Drafting copies of stories*

The focus of the first workshop was the introduction of the idea of story writing and the production of the first draft of a story. We spent some time talking with participants and encouraging them to feel comfortable with one another. To extend these relationships, we used the same pairing of participants for talking over ideas, reading to one another, and providing suggestions. Part of this time was also used to help the teachers to recognise the potential of everyday interactions and experience to be the source of powerful stories.

We used ideas from Wassermann (1993) to help the participants understand the nature of writing about professional events. We provided a descriptive definition of stories along with guidelines for writing about the selected situation. (See Appendix for copy of handout: What is a story?). We also provided some ideas for choosing what to write about. (See Appendix for copy of handout: Writing a story).

We then read two examples to help participants understand the idea of professional stories. The stories had been written by part-time students who were experienced early childhood teachers enrolled in the final year of a Bachelor of Education degree. We read

*The Goldfish Story* which began with a description of what happened when a small boy brought his dead goldfish to preschool because he believed it was sleeping. The story included the teacher's reaction to this situation and a rather humorous account of the burial of the goldfish. There was a pause after reading the story and it seemed like a good idea to ask the participants to write their response to *The Goldfish Story*. We hadn't planned to do this, but it seemed to be appropriate to start writing by responding to someone else's story which had an emotional impact on the group. In fact, this worked quite well. All the participants, (including the workshop leaders) wrote quietly for a while and then read their responses aloud and this resulted in a wide range of different reactions to the story. More than any other activity provided on the first day, these responses to *The Goldfish Story* seemed to help everyone relax, understand that their contribution was valuable and re-confirm the value of shared stories.

By the end of the first workshop, participants had mapped out ideas for two stories based on each writer's personal experience, along with their response to *The Goldfish Story*. They worked on these three pieces of writing and were invited to return to the next workshop with drafts for sharing with others. The emotional energy generated by the group's enthusiasm was a noticeable feature of the day. Participants were excited about their ideas and keen to work on their stories. As they were working, they often stopped to talk to their partner about the story they were writing or recall another story they wanted to share.

**The second workshop**

*Re-visiting and revising: Sharing draft stories. Story conferencing and editing.*

Participants were encouraged to use the time in this workshop to complete the final version of their stories. We began by sharing responses to *The Goldfish Story* and then started work on individual stories. A number of strategies were used to help participants refine their stories. First, there was an information sheet containing 'Self Editing Guidelines'. (See Appendix for copy of handout: Self Editing Guidelines). Second, participants were encouraged to read their stories using the same partners as in the previous workshop. A set of questions for a 'Collaborative Conversation' helped the listener focus on effective feedback for the author. (See Appendix for copy of handout: Questions for a Collaborative Conversation). Feedback was provided by concentrating on helping the author make her meaning clear, rather than checking the 'correctness' of expression.

Each participant selected one of their stories and read it to their partner who provided feedback using the questions for a 'Collaborative Conversations'. Time was then allowed for everyone to revise their first story individually using the 'Self Editing Guidelines'. After editing the first story, the participants discussed their responses to the set of questions stimulating the collaborative conversations for editing purposes. Most people seemed to think they were helpful, although they found that some of the questions were superfluous because most stories already included sufficient detail.

The editing procedure was repeated with the second story. First, each participant read their story to their partner, second the 'Collaborative Conversations' were used to assist feedback, and finally the authors used the 'Self-Editing Guidelines' to help improve their stories. After working on their second stories, the participants discussed the value of the 'Self Editing Guidelines' for editing. The guidelines seemed to be more useful than the questions used in the 'Collaborative Conversations', although some participants found these more complex guidelines less valuable. Participants were, however, interested in the impact of specific word choice for conveying points of view and highlighting their perceptions of the roles of 'players' in the stories. They found that the choice of a particular word could strongly influence the reader's interpretation of the situation.

**The third workshop**

*Celebrating completed stories. Sharing final copy of stories.*

This final session was a social evening held to celebrate the completed versions of two stories from each participant. Copies of the stories had been faxed to the workshop leaders and a professional typist was employed to re-type the stories in a similar style and to include suitable illustrations in the final version. A spiral-bound folder was prepared for each participant so they had a copy of all the stories written by members of the group.

Each participant read one of their stories to the group. After congratulations all round, everyone worked on a reflective response to each of their stories. These responses added a richness and depth encouraged by distanced reflection and consideration of other possible actions or issues related to the incidents which were central to each story. The rest of the evening was spent in celebration.

**Sources for stories**

So, given an invitation to use writing as an opportunity for professional reflection: what did these women choose to write about? First, they reflected their passion for and

commitment to working with young children, mostly in settings for children under five years of age. Their experiences were all different in one sense, ranging from the person in her first paid employment, to the one who was between jobs because she had 'burnt-out' in her previous position, to the casual teacher in the school system, to the one who was now teaching at TAFE, to others who were very experienced directors in preschools and child care centres. In another sense, however, the commonalities of issues struck a responsive chord. When they brain-stormed possible events to record and 'unpack', there were the laughs and head-shakes of recognition, the 'Oh yes, isn't that awful!', or the 'I never know what to do about that!', or 'Isn't it great when that happens!', or 'What did you do then, I'm going through that now?'

A sample of these topics may help to give the flavour of the type of situations which motivated these teachers to face the writing challenge. There was the director faced with a staff member who had breached confidentiality about families in the centre by chatting with a parent who had become a personal friend. Her learning? 'I will never again assume that staff have the same understanding of professional issues as I do ... '. There was the anxiety of a staff member faced with a parent meeting to consider 'expelling' a two year old child who was a 'biter'. In her reflection, she commented: 'Throughout this experience I stood alone against mounting opposition ... One outcome of the meeting was that I now value my strength as a communicator, motivator and leader ... '. Then there was the story of one writer's first day of teaching in a preschool in a coastal town. She wrote about her fears, confusion and the way she approached the day. (The child urinating on the slippery dip was only one of the challenges presented to her on this memorable morning). 'It's interesting to note that what seemed like a disaster ten years ago is now a very funny anecdote, and it makes me realise that each year introducing children and families to a new service gets easier.' It is also interesting that this opportunity to write provided a chance for the debriefing of a day which had taken on horror proportions in the teacher's mind, and which needed this reflection to become a positive growth point.

There were issues about staff communications, teacher/parent relationships, challenging children, interesting curriculum, and programming decisions. There were unfathomable rules and restrictive regulations, humorous events, and issues associated with implementing change. In short, there were the elements which are part of every preservice and inservice teacher education program, those things which are central to the nature of the teacher's work. Personal professional writing was the vehicle for learning for these teachers, the opportunity to review their previous learning and consider future decision-making. It is an avenue which deserves to be widely used, in a supportive, personalised environment. That is, after all, the way in which we would like all teachers

to work with children. Writing workshops provide us with the chance to model a way of learning, to open doors for individuals and return the responsibility of professional growth to the learners.

**Workshop reflections**

An interesting aspect of this series of workshops was the numbers of teachers involved. In debating how to organise the workshops, the three workshop leaders made 'guesstimates' of how many people might respond to our invitation to write about their work. Guesses ranged from a few to over one hundred. The final 15 participants were expected by one, but a puzzle to the others. We believed that every teacher has great insight into her or his work and the potential to write effective stories of important events or interactions in their professional lives. So why were we not overwhelmed by people wishing to write as part of their professional renewal? The answers seem to include both the pragmatic and the personal. One aspect is certainly the lack of time. Teaching at any level is demanding and tiring. Trying to fit in further study and family commitments makes it impossible for many people to give up two Saturdays for workshops.

Another aspect, however, that might have been more germane, was the nature of the activity itself. Many people have not had the opportunity of discovering the power of writing. School and employment requirements have left them with a very utilitarian view of writing, something useful for reports, lists, and perhaps letters or an essay. They may not have experienced the impact of writing to personally debrief a distressing or problematic incident, the 'creating at the point of utterance' which happens as if clarified perception emerged directly from the pen without pre-thought. Writing is itself a way of reflecting on, reliving, enjoying or perhaps learning from experience.

Sometimes listening to other writers can help us more fully understand the power of writing. An important speaker in the field is Donald Graves (1990) who is the key figure in the classroom writing movement which challenged teachers to look at what children bring to the writing process, rather than concentrating solely on prescribed products. In answering a question on why he felt it was important for teachers to write themselves he wrote:

> *The very stance that teachers take toward the world through personal learning and enquiry, the 'why' questions they trigger because they wonder about the world are the strongest contributors to the climate of their classrooms ... I wrote about my dog's fears and wondered why some dogs are terrified by loud noises and why others, trained to hunt, relish them.*

> *Through it all, I continue to learn about myself, because I describe in detail the everyday issues around me and end up discovering my own point of view. I begin to acquire a voice and a sense of assurance about what I know of the world around me. The more I see and understand, the more I am free to wonder, to be struck by mystery, to express doubt. Writing is too important to be relegated only to children; it is important enough for us all to include it as a basic part of our own lives.* (p 36)

The potential benefit from and impact of writing does not, however, include a guarantee of easy success in putting words on paper. Some people struggle over every word committed to the page, while others find it difficult to get started at all. Mem Fox (1993), the author of well-known books such as *Possum Magic* states: 'I'm a writer. As such I often see myself as a bloodied and wounded soldier staggering around a battlefield in an attempt to conquer the blank page' (p.1). If, however, as this project clearly demonstrated, reflective story-writing of professional practice is extremely powerful and satisfying for those who find the courage to attempt it, then we need to find ways to encourage it for ourselves and our field-based colleagues. Again, Mem Fox's experience (1993, p. 41) provides a possible solution.

> *How do I, as a teacher, organise myself to write? I have a group of six friends, all of whom teach writing, who provide me with an audience at least one evening a month, over nibbles and coffee, or something stronger. We share our pieces about home, work, life, children, colleagues, hopes, memories, and so on in an atmosphere of noncompetitive trust. If it weren't for the writing group, I would hardly ever write at all, because I need an audience so badly ... My deadline is usually met a couple of hours before we are due to meet ... We laugh over our wickedness in presenting first drafts most of the time ... We give critical help seriously when it's asked for. What we all know is that we would never write, outside the requirements of our work, if we didn't have the group to write for. A writing group within a school or outside it, or just one receptive friend, gives courage and purpose to any guilty nonwriter who wishes to reform.*

So as teacher educators, perhaps our first task is to write ourselves about incidents of professional practice, in order to remember how powerful such writing can be. Then we need to find opportunities to share teachers' stories with both preservice and inservice students and colleagues, perhaps as starting points for discussion about the rich nature of teachers' work. Finally, we might promote reflective writing groups which can enable teachers to gain greater insight into their professional decisions, respect for the complexity of their work, and opportunities for professional growth.

*And we conclude with a final cryptic note from Margaret which was sent to us some weeks after the workshops: "Thank you for the opportunity to explore a new dimension of teaching. The results have been quite unexpected".*

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